

THE DIRECTOR OF
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NOTE FOR THE DIRECTOR

FROM: Herbert E. Meyer
Vice Chairman, NIC

This cri de coeur over the UK's
Conservative Party has an echo that leaders
of our country's GOP should hear.

HEM

Herbert E. Meyer

Attachment:

Article from London Times,
May 21, 1985: "Rabble without
a cause" by Bernard Levin

Same note sent to:

George Keyworth
Robert Tuttle
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THE TIMES TUESDAY MAY 21, 1985

Bernard Levin: the way we live now

Rabble without a cause

I first became interested in politics when I was a schoolboy. I used to read the Parliamentary Reports in *The Times*, and kept an annotated register of MPs. I think I classified them according to their distance from my own views, which at that time were roughly those held today by Mr Kinnock — that is, based on the assumptions that would be made by a rather naive 15-year-old. (My excuse is that I was a rather naive 15-year-old; what is Mr Kinnock's?)

A few years went by, and I was a fellow-student of Sir Alfred Sherman, who was the leader of the LSE Communist Party. I always knew he would go far. I had had ambitions for a political career, but at the university I shed them pretty quickly, together with the naive 15-year-old's views.

Another few years and I had become a journalist, and began to write about politics, among many other subjects. I had first voted in a general election in 1951; I voted Labour. A certain amount of disillusion with Labour set in shortly afterwards, but I certainly voted for them in 1955 and 1959. In 1957 I became a parliamentary correspondent; Gaitskill became my hero, not only for his own qualities but also by way of reaction from my contemplation of the malignant shadow dogging his footsteps. I may not have been the first man to take the full measure of Harold Wilson, but I am sure I was the first to proclaim that measure regularly and frequently, and a fat lot of good it did. I voted Labour, I admit, in both 1964 and 1966, when he was leader, but by then I had known for many years that in a democracy it is frequently necessary to enter the polling booth holding one's nose. More years rolled by; I voted Labour in 1970, despite feeling strongly that it was a mistake to do so.

I have not done so since. As more years passed, Labour began to stampede not just towards the left, but away from sanity; worse, away from liberty. My recoil from them was largely based on that, but there was another element, my growing conviction that what governments could do was far more limited than most of them profess most of the time. At the feet of Sir Karl Popper, I had learned to distrust the past as a

guide to the future; now I had to learn that the present was not much help either. I have quoted Michael Oakeshott's splendid metaphor before; it will endure another airing:

In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-point nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every inimical occasion.

It was in that sceptical frame of mind that I watched Britain's retreat through the Seventies; the withering of enterprise, the increasing reliance on the state (and the increasing greed of the state for those willing to be reliant upon it), the general political decay, best symbolized by the rise of Solomon Binding, though we should not forget Mr Heath's invention of "comparability", to get him off the miners' hook.

Suddenly, there was somebody else. Mrs Thatcher, from the moment she threw her hat in the ring (she had sewn rocks into the lining, which is why it hurt Mr Heath so much when it hit him), began not only to talk a different political language, but to behave as though she meant what she said. I sat up sharply to watch the fun, and voted for her in 1979 with considerable enthusiasm, and in 1983 with even more. Now read on.

All this autobiography has a point. *Tempora mutantur*... I have moved restlessly through the political landscape of my time, and though it is not difficult to portray my journey as a continuous progress from left to right, it would be misleading; you will find nothing like the *abjuro* of Paul Johnson in my writings. The sceptical stance in politics, which I adopted (or which adopted me) decades ago, still serves me well in monitoring political activity anywhere on the spectrum, but it means that I could never drop anchor; whatever happens. I remain, and always will, a floating voter. But there is one, and only one, political position that, through all the years and all my changing views and feelings, has never altered, never

come into question, never seemed too simple for a complex world. It is my profound and unwavering contempt for the Conservative Party.

That is much more remarkable than it may at first appear. The Conservative Party, after all, has not remained the same; there have been several Conservative parties in my time. When that schoolboy pored over *The Times*, for instance, the Tories in the House of Commons were the pre-war vintage. Most of them had supported Chamberlain, and never stopped hating Churchill. Harold Nicolson looked round the room at Chips Channon's end-of-the-war party, and saw "the Nurembergers and the Munichois celebrating our victory over their friend Herr von Ribbentrop".

Well, it was not difficult to despise that generation, and to rejoice when they went down in 1945. But then, as I looked at the Tory ranks in the six years of the Labour administration, together with the new intake when the Tories returned to power, an amazing truth dawned: the next generation was actually worse than its predecessor. It was characterized chiefly by meanness of spirit; they hated the welfare state, not at all (except for a handful of the old guard, like Sir Waldron Smithers) because they foresaw the nanny state that eventually grew from it, but because it took money from the "right" people and gave it to the wrong; I

suppose one of the most formative political episodes of my life — formative far more widely and deeply than its effect on my politics — was the contemptuous jeering from the Tories at the thought that the National Health Service was giving people teeth and spectacles.

It became a kind of expletive: "teethandspectacles, teethandspectacles", they chanted, enraged by the thought that the poor might live a better life. If it had not been for R. A. Butler and his patient, careful work in nursing a new breed of Tory MPs and officials, the party would have descended to a level of *Schweinerei* from which it might never again have risen.

But what actually happened was no better. Under Macmillan, who

offered nothing but his cynical "Enrichissez-vous!", all principles, even vile ones, were abandoned by the Tories, as they fought to get their bread in the gravy. Going to the Tory conference in the Macmillan years provided a unique insight into the furthest reaches of fatuity, complacency and selfishness attainable by the human race. I remember overhearing a middle-aged woman delegate, with husband in tow, talking to another such couple. One pair had installed a television set at home, the other were thinking of doing so. "Yes", she said, "I suppose we ought to have a television, to know what the ordinary people are thinking".

I can see her now if I close my eyes; dowdy, vacant, overweight. I never saw anything so ordinary in my life (her husband matched her perfectly), and she wanted to know what the ordinary people were thinking. I believe, and I always will, that the premature death of Hugh Gaitskell was the single most damaging political event in Britain in the postwar world, for he left his party to face that Tory attitude, and the Tory attitudes that grew from it later, in the hands of Harold Wilson, an experience from which Labour has never recovered and the country only to a limited extent.

At the Labour conference there were and are people very much worse than that silly woman. There are people who want to destroy this country's freedom, and who work implacably, and with a good deal of success so far, towards that goal; there are also the massed ranks of union delegates, devoid of all energy, understanding, magnanimity, largeness of character or imagination - the visible, tangible incarnation of Britain's industrial failure; and up on the platform men are jockeying for power, lying about their beliefs to gain favour with one group or another, pretending to love colleagues whom they hate, and willing to go to any lengths in damaging the country's interests if it will help them to get their behinds



'Labour began to stampede not just towards the left but away from'

on the government benches. And yet their veins are full of blood, not Babyham, and the visitor does not want to go out into the corridor to quell his shuddering stomach, whereas I truly believe that I have not spent a full day at any Tory conference without at some point longing, in Cassandra's famous phrase, for a quiet corner, an aspidistra, a handkerchief and the old heave-ho.

It is only very recently, with the rise of Thugdom Triumphant, with the Scargills outside Parliament and those who have taken to practising physical intimidation inside, that it has become possible for me to despise the Labour Party as I despise the Tories, although for different reasons. Yet still, one look at the other side and the devout will be inclined to cross themselves, the superstitious will finger a rabbit's paw and the wholly materialist will call for brandy.

For today, difficult though it may be to believe, the party's condition is worse than ever. The old guard condemn Mrs Thatcher as a lower middle-class swot who has never read any history, and the newer ones, who have never read any history themselves, or anything else either, are so busy selling their services to bucket-shop proprietors in need of an MP on their letterhead to impress the punters that it is as much as they can do to remember to have their Herbie Frogg shirts monogrammed.

I once described a prominent Conservative - never mind which one - as having the vision of a mole, the passion of a speak-your-weight machine and the oratorical eloquence of a whoopee-cushion. But I did so in the course of urging support for him, and the reason for my urging was that he wanted to change this country for what he thought was the better.

Not the better off; the better. Today, if you lined up the Tory MPs, the conference representatives and the entire staff of Central Office, you could throw coconuts at them for an hour and a half without hitting one who knew the difference. Where among them are more than a handful who dream of changing Britain, of offering her citizens an aim beyond a bigger car and the suppression of football hooliganism, of believing that there is a moral content to national life, of building cathedrals and pulling down Victoria Street?

That is a lot to ask, is it? Then let me ask less. How many are not hankering for a return to "consensus", for the tiniest increase in inflation (5 per cent, say), for a programme of artificial job creation that will make the figures look better until after the next general election, for leaving the rating system alone, for just a little expansion of the money supply, for an increase in parliamentary allowances for sec-

port, pension arrangements, entertainment of constituents and travel?

Now the most significant aspect of this state of affairs lies in the fact that an astonishingly high proportion of Conservative leaders have despised their followers quite as much as I do. Obviously, Churchill did; more subtly, though no less deeply, Macmillan did; Heath would have been mad, or almost incredibly generous, if he hadn't, and not only after they removed him from the leadership; above all, our present Prime Minister does.

And so she should. For she is the one post-Churchill prime minister of either party who actually has a vision of this country's transformation and future, who has offered that vision to the nation, who has seen the nation beginning to respond to it, and then finds that the moment the opinion polls show a blip on the screen, fully two and a half years before there is the least likelihood of an election, blue funk is running through her party like Aids at an orgy.

When Mrs Thatcher makes it clear that she wants to destroy the class structure of Britain, she means it. When she insists on returning to private ownership concerns like the telephone system, British Aerospace, the Gas Board, British Airways and I hope many more, she makes sure that the public, and not just the City friends of some of the spivs on her back benches, can obtain a share in the country's potentially profitable assets. When she decides that council-house tenants should have the right to buy their homes, she introduces legislation to that end.

What do you suppose it was that first gave Mrs Thatcher her appeal to the country? To find out the answer to that question, you only had to stand still for 10 minutes and listen; you could hear it all round you, and from those who disagreed with her policies as much as those who believed in them. It was that in Margaret Thatcher the country had again, after many a summer, got a leader who knew her own mind, spoke it, and acted upon it. And what was, what is, her mind? It is nothing less than the transmogrification of Britain into a nation of self-reliant, prospering individualists.

She will change the way people see the world and the way they think. She will make us all see that to save for our old age is not only a morally commendable thing to do,

but is also likely to make our old age much more comfortable than relying on the state's pension. She will persuade us that it is not wrong that those who can afford more than a token contribution to their medical care should be obliged to pay it and when she has taught us that lesson, we shall teach ourselves to make better and more careful use of such facilities. Nor will she stop there.

She will make trade union leaders responsible to their members and if she lives long enough she will go on to make the members responsible to the industry that will make them better off if they will allow it to. She will make it easier for entrepreneurs, big and little, to start or extend businesses, she will encourage innovators, she will make the country, once again, respect those who produce the wealth ("when the water rises, all the boats rise with it") of nation.

I am joking, of course. She will not do such things, though she would dearly like to, because her own party will prevent her. She won the 1979 election for them single-handed; she had rather more support from her colleagues in 1983, but that was only because the party started as the clear favourite, so they were putting their money on the leading horse. (Even then, Mr Pym drew attention to the dangers of a landslide majority, and then seemed astonished when she hastened to get rid of him as soon as she was back in Downing Street.) Now a couple of parliamentary seats have been lost, the local elections have proved a serious disappointment, and the opinion polls are adverse; the standard of revolt has therefore been raised and U-turns are demanded. Come, talk gently to the TUC, tell Sir Keith to make more money available, cover the country with factories in which a million men may be found employment in



**'Above all Tory leaders,
the present one despises
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extracting moonbeams from cucumbers, above all don't be so *abrasive*. Be like Mr Julian Critchley; he's not abrasive, and look where he's got – writes regularly for *The Listener*, he does, and the ladies of his constituency association positively adore him.

And why doesn't she lower her voice? And drop the GLC Bill as a gesture to national unity? And give up confrontation? And above all, *save our seats*. Save our seats by hook or by crook, or by both; save our seats by the abandonment of the vain (and anyway far too abrasive) hope of changing the country; save our seats by a liberal distribution of Danegeld; save our seats by making the compassionate Mr Walker Chancellor of the Exchequer; save our seats by hinting at an alliance with the Alliance; save our seats by putting Mr Pym in the Cabinet and Mr Prior and Mr Heath and indeed Mr Critchley; save our seats by what we would do in similar circumstances – that is, save our seats by fudging and smudging and nudging, by pretending that Britain's problems can be solved without pain to anyone, by seeking the Middle Ground, the Middle Way and the Middle Ages. Let us lean neither too far to the right nor too far to the left, neither excessively forward nor exaggeratedly back, neither too much up nor superfluously down. That way we shall save our seats; we know that many of us in the new intake of 1979 and 1983 look, sound and behave like so many used-car salesmen who do a bit of safe-blowing on the side, but we wouldn't want to earn our living that way if we could help it.

Have you noticed that some people *hate* Mrs Thatcher? That, I dare say, upsets Denis more than it does her. But it dismays me not at all. For it means that the medicine, nasty though it tastes, may yet cure the patient. Who hated Macmillan, Home, Heath? Who hated Wilson, Callaghan, Foot, and who hates Kinnock?

They say they hate her for her "manner", her "ruthlessness", her "obstinacy", above all for her "lack of compassion". They lie; they hate her because they are afraid she might succeed, and transform Britain into a country where endeavour thrives, where merit advances, where the invaluable uniqueness of each individual is promoted and made much of, where success, not failure, is commended. To sum up in terms as offensive as I can find words for, Margaret Thatcher wants Britain to be a country in which nobody has power and influence *either* because he went to bed at Eton with a future Cabinet minister, *or* because he commands at the Labour Party conference hundreds of thousands of votes half of which were rigged and the other half bought.

That is the kind of country I, and many others, want too. Shall we have it? Or shall we let the Conservative Party ensure that we do not?

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